

Message Text

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ACTION SY-05

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CCO-00 MED-05 /030 W
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P 201622Z JUL 78
FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4577
INFO AMCONSUL FRANKFURT

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DEPT. FOR A/SY/OPS/FO AND A/SY/NSU FROM RSO

FRANKFURT FOR RSS

E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: ASEC, ABLD, AFOP, UR, US
SUBJECT: EMBASSY POWER PANEL FIRE

REFS: (A) MOSCOW 16893 (NOTAL), (B) STATE 182459
(NOTAL), (C) RSO TOLSON - A/SY/OPS/FO SPENCE
TELECON 7/19/78

1. FOR THE PAST SEVERAL DAYS POST HAS BEEN IN THE
PROCESS OF CONVERTING THE EMBASSY POWER SUPPLY
FROM 127/220 TO 220/380 VOLTS. THIS
WORK HAD BEEN PROCEEDING AT A SLOW BUT SATISFACTORY
PACE. AS CONVERSION TOOK PLACE THE ACTUAL
VOLTAGE SUPPLIED BY THE SOVIETS WAS MEASURED AT
APPROXIMATELY 235/415 VOLTS. IN AN EFFORT TO
REDUCE THE VOLTAGE TO THE PROPER 220/380 VOLTS,
THE SOVIETS INFORMED US ON JULY 19 THAT ALL POWER
TO THE EMBASSY WOULD BE SHUT OFF AT APPROXIMATELY
1300. THIS OUTAGE WAS REQUIRED SO THAT THE SOVIETS
COULD MAKE THE APPROPRIATE TRANSFORMER TAP ADJUSTMENTS
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AT THEIR TRANSFORMER STATION TO REDUCE THE VOLTAGE
TO THE PROPER LEVELS. AT APPROXIMATELY 1315, JULY
19, WHILE THE SOVIETS WERE IN THE PROCESS OF CUTTING
OFF THE POWER, ONE OF THE SOVIET PANELS LOCATED IN THE
BASEMENT OF THE CENTRAL WING LITERALLY EXPLODED.

2. RESIDENT SEABEE CEC JOHN CLEMENTS WAS IN THE

POWER ROOM FACING THE PANEL WHEN IT EXPLODED. THREE OTHER AMERICAN PERSONNEL WERE STANDING JUST OUTSIDE THE ROOM AND WITNESSED THE EXPLOSION. A MINOR FIRE RESULTED WHICH WAS QUICKLY EXTINGUISHED.

3. CLEMENTS HAS SUFFERED SECOND DEGREE BURNS ON HIS RIGHT FOREARM, A SMALL AREA OF HIS RIGHT HAND AND FIRST AND SECOND DEGREE BURNS IN A SMALL AREA OF HIS ABDOMEN. HE ALSO SUFFERED FROM MODERATE SMOKE INHALATION WITHOUT COMPLICATIONS. HIS EYES HAVE BEEN TEMPORARILY AFFECTED BY FLASH BURN. NO OTHER INJURIES. HIS PRESENT CONDITION IS DESCRIBED AS GOOD.

4. AFTER GENERAL CLEANING IN THE POWER ROOM WAS COMPLETED AND TESTS PERFORMED ON REMAINING SOVIET EQUIPMENT, POWER WAS RESTORED TO THE EMBASSY COMPLEX INCLUDING THE COMCENTER, BUT NOT THE OFFICES LOCATED ON UPPER FLOORS OF THE CHANCERY, BY APPROXIMATELY 1830, JULY 19. THE PANEL WHICH EXPLODED WAS THE MAIN FEEDER SERVICE FOR THE GENERAL OFFICE AREAS. SEABEE PERSONNEL WERE ABLE TO RESTORE A REDUCED POWER CAPABILITY TO THE OFFICE AREAS BY APPROXIMATELY 2200, JULY 19. NO ESTIMATE AT PRESENT REGARDING LENGTH OF TIME REQUIRED BY SOVIETS TO REPAIR DAMAGED PANEL.

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5. THE ACTUAL CAUSE OF THE EXPLOSION IS NOT KNOWN. WE SPECULATE THAT THE EXPLOSION WAS CAUSED BY EXCESSIVE VOLTAGE BEING PLACED ACROSS THE DISCONNECT SWITCH. THIS ASSUMPTION IS BASED ON THE MANNER IN WHICH THE METAL SWITCHING ARM AND CONTACTS WERE MELTED/FUSED AND IN SOME CASES DISINTEGRATED. THIS DISCONNECT SWITCH HAD BEEN IN THE CIRCUIT FOR OVER TWO DAYS AT THE RATED VOLTAGE OF 235/415 VOLTS UNDER NORMAL LOAD CONDITIONS (VOLTAGE RATING SHOULD HAVE BEEN 220/380). AT THE TIME OF EXPLOSION THE CIRCUIT WAS UNDER A NO LOAD CONDITION. PHOTOGRAPHS AND THE SWITCH'S BAKELITE BACKING WITH REMAINS OF METAL CONTACTS WILL BE FURNISHED TO A/SY/OPS/T FOR ANALYSIS AS DEEMED APPROPRIATE. MATLOCK

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